

I Light this Candle: Using Rituals in Teaching

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The use of rituals in the classroom can enrich and enhance learning. They can also build a sense of community and belonging which in turn makes the classroom a safer place to risk sharing ideas and engaging in class discussion. Rituals also bring closure to a particular segment of the class learning experience or for the class itself. How many times have instructors taught the last class of a term or the final class of students' university education without marking this rite of passage of having completed all of the classes required for a university degree? For many students who do not attend their graduation, the last class may afford them a unique opportunity to reflect on their passage of learning for their degree. This paper suggests that the classroom offers many opportunities for building rituals. It provides examples and guidelines for creating rituals. The instructor who is willing to spend the time to engage students in these activities will enrich the subject matter and the students' learning experience. Rituals, however, need to be carefully considered to ensure that they are culturally and historically sensitive.

Introduction

Creating rituals can revitalize course content and intensify a learning experience. They can increase a student's commitment to learning, create a sense of belonging, and help the class develop into a community, not just a collection of individuals. Many different rituals, formal and informal, positive and oppressive, occur in the learning environment. An awareness of our own rituals as instructors, the rituals of instruction, remind us of the power and political messages embedded in rituals. Rituals are both memory- and meaning-making. Many of the rituals of instruction

are standardized and formalized by the educational institution; however, each instructor, either deliberately or accidentally, forms their own rituals of instruction. The purpose here is to explore rituals created to revitalize or intensify content (McLaren, 1985).

The Accidental Ritual

It was a warm Friday in April and I was teaching Research from 3:00-5:00 to the fourth-year BSW stu-

dents – hardly a great time for the subject, students, or instructor. I knew this was their last class and that they had all been together since first year so I decided to take my newly acquired academic regalia to class. In the waning moments of the class I gowned and then began a talk about the meaning of a BSW, MSW, and a PhD degree, and the importance of life-long education as a way to avoid burn-out, in a serious but positive way. I became aware of that very still silence that occurs when students are really listening. Then I heard a few audible sniffs. I thought they might be laughing and enjoying my sense of humour, but when I looked across the room I realized a number of students had tears in their eyes and that they weren't laughing-tears. I had hit a nerve. It had not occurred to them or to me, that this small group of students had taken almost every course together since first year. They had, all of a sudden, come to the enormous realization that "it was over." I finished talking and there was absolute silence followed by a burst of applause. It was not that I was so good – it was, as a number of students told me after the class, that I was the only instructor who had recognized their last class in a special way.

In my attempt to give to my class that day, they in fact gave me a much more powerful lesson, one that I have carried with me throughout my teaching career. The lesson was about the need to celebrate rites of passage and to bring closure to our classes. I make it a practice now of honouring all last classes with a ritual. I still gown and talk about the three degrees, but I also speak about my hopes for what they learned in the class for life-long learning. We adjourn to a more informal setting and a tea party. It has been almost 40 years since I began my university education and yet I can remember distinctly the very few instructors who in some way made their classes different and special places to be, and in so doing, built within me a sense of belonging and a sense of their love for learning and for their subject.

A Typology of Rituals

McLaren (1985) identifies a typology of rituals, which include: rituals of revitalization, intensification, and

resistance. In this paper, we will focus primarily on creating rituals that revitalize. Rituals of revitalization may include: rituals related to repeated rules and codes of behaviour; beginning the second term of the same course; and summarizing materials already covered. One of the revitalizing rituals related to rules and codes that I have created was designed to help students remember the six values of the Canadian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics as follows: 1) respect for inherent dignity and worth persons; 2) pursuit of social justice; 3) service to humanity; 4) integrity of professional practice; 5) confidentiality in professional practice; and 6) competency in professional practice (Canadian Association of Social Work, 2005). Students learn these in first year, apply them to ethical dilemmas in second year, review them before entering field practice in their third year, and again in field orientation before entering a final field practice in fourth year.

In an effort to make these values "stick" and to make the review more interesting, "the candle ritual" has evolved. I prepare a short written segment for each of the values drawn from the Code, which is read by volunteers from the audience of students, field instructors, and/or faculty as they "light this candle." We light a beginning candle for the profession of social work and we end by lighting a last candle for those no longer with us, who inspired us in our career paths. In fourth year, field orientation takes place in December and so I add another candle to remember the Montreal Massacre. This ritual is conducted in second- and fourth-year classes and is now well on its way to becoming a school tradition.

Within our classrooms, there are many informal and formalized rituals of instruction such as: the presentation of the course outline at the beginning of a course; the use of learning laboratories; guidelines for papers; and the examination process. These rituals delineate instructor-student roles and the expectations for learning. Individual instructors develop their own class rituals. One instructor always concludes class with the question, "what did you learn today?" and does a brief "round-the-room" for answers. The ritual shows the instructor which points the students identify as most important. This ritual also clearly sets the expectation that something is to

be learned. Another instructor has a “doodle” break in the middle of every class to help refocus the class attention.

How to Make a Ritual

When creating a ritual, it is often helpful to think about rituals in which you have participated and how they affect you, and then to think about rituals which you did not find effective. The use of rituals in teaching is somewhat like the exclamation mark in writing, something not to be over-used, but when used well, serves to focus attention, stress importance, and mark something as being worth remembering. Why do we sing Auld Lang Syne at New Year’s? Why do many rituals use lighting candles? Why do you want to create or use a ritual? What issues might be problematic in using a ritual in your classroom? What cultural sensitivities should you be aware of amongst your students? How will this ritual benefit, augment, and/or highlight your learning goals?

Having considered all of the above, you have decided that you want to make a ritual for your classroom. At this point, you are ready to engage in the following process: 1) decide what type of ritual you wish to create; 2) determine why you think a ritual would be a good way to convey the learning you have in mind for the class; 3) decide how often this ritual should occur; 4) decide when the ritual should occur (Do you want to have an ritual at the beginning, at the middle or at the end of each class or do you want to have a ritual after all the class presentations are completed?); 5) decide where your ritual will occur (In the class room or in a different setting?); 6) decide what props, costumes, music, and dialogue are needed; 7) decide how long your ritual will be; (Church of the Larger Fellowship, 2002) and then 8) consider how you will know if the ritual has had the desired effect.

The easiest rituals to create are those that are patterned after other recognized rituals. Care must be taken to ensure that your “re-creation” does not offend or ridicule the original ritual. As my class presentations are usually group interactive, multi-media presentations using art, drama, music, dance, mime, and role-plays, I give awards

– like mini-Oscars. The award is re-named for the class, for example, if the textbook is by Smith, I will award “the Smithies.” Each group of presenters or each individual presenter receives an award which is presentation specific such as “Best limited presentation using animated power point” or “Best limited presentation using music to illustrate social work theory.” A small inexpensive statute, often a pencil or a pen with the university name, or a small decoration or candle, is given as the award is announced. The awards acknowledge the strength of each presentation, but also bring closure on that part of the course.

Cautions Related to Developing and Using Rituals

Creating rituals can cause discomfort. Caution needs to be used in creating rituals. Rituals should never become a “habit.” Instructors should review why the ritual is being used and critically consider whether there are any students who might find the ritual offensive.

Rituals should not be destructive. They foster community, but it is essential to remember that they also exclude and point out similarities as well as differences. They have symbols, but some symbols change and develop negative meanings over time. Rituals or parts of the ritual might become culturally insensitive over time (Young, 1999). They are effective when they are not over-used and change from a ritual to a routine. Rituals do not always convey what is intended and may invite their own unique meaning-making which may enhance or detract from the intention of the ritual. Historical and cultural contexts need to be carefully considered. However, in spite of the cautions, if well-used, rituals can add richness and value, and inspire both instructors and students (Grimes, 2006).

Conclusion

Rituals, large and small, elaborate or simple, give our classes meaning, variety, and vitality. They can

enhance content and intensify the commitment to learning. They offer an opportunity for increased involvement and development of a sense of community and belonging. However, they must be carefully considered because their potential for harm is as great as their potential for positive outcomes. Creating rituals offers an opportunity to highlight important concepts and adds an element of surprise which is often in and of itself an effective technique to engage learning. We all need to be aware of the rituals we engage in when we teach, the power they hold, and the impact that they may have on our students and the learning environment.

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